

San Bernardino Sun

Agency: Southland ailing gets low grades

Problems with housing prices, air quality intensify, says regional report

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February 04, 2005 - This report card probably won't end up on a refrigerator.

The Southern California Association of Governments gave low marks to the six-county region's housing, mobility, education, air quality and income. Employment and safety scored well, but no grade was higher than a B.

"It's a snapshot of deficiencies," said San Bernardino Councilwoman Susan Lien Longville. "It's important to have your eyes wide open so that you know where to place your priorities."

The annual report card released Thursday analyzed 2003 data from San Bernardino, Riverside, Los Angeles, Orange, Imperial and Ventura counties. The agency, better known as SCAG, is the largest regional planning entity in the nation and has issued similar reports annually since 1998.

"It's quite understandable; when you look at a larger area, you are going to see the problems," said Lien Longville, a SCAG Regional Council member.

The Inland Empire probably would have scored better in areas such as housing and employment if graded alone, but it may have brought the region's air quality grade down, said San Bernardino County Supervisor Paul Biane.

Even so, it's important to grade the entire region, he said.

"We have to be collectively concerned about where these grades are and where we need to improve," he said.

Local leaders can use the report when they approach officials in Sacramento and Washington, to lobby for funding, Biane said.

A SCAG committee made up of local elected officials and regional issues experts prepared the report card after researching various statistics.

Air quality and housing were the only two areas that lost ground on the agency's State of the Region report card.

The region saw residential building permits skyrocket to about 78,300 units in 2003 an increase of 10,000 from 2002 and the largest jump in a one-year period since 1989. San Bernardino and Riverside counties accounted for 55percent of the growth.

But SCAG lowered last year's housing score from a D-plus to a D because soaring home prices and less income growth kept home ownership out of reach for many. All six counties suffered lower housing affordability than the national average, the report showed.

The air quality grade dipped from a C to a C-minus. The report noted that the South Coast Air Quality Management District, which does not include San Bernardino County's High Desert, recorded 68 days when air quality dropped below the federal one-hour ozone standard.

In 2002, there were 49.

AQMD spokesman Sam Atwood said pollution from vehicles, locomotives, cargo ships and airplanes still plague the region, but air quality has improved greatly since the 1970s when lung-choking smog regularly kept sensitive people indoors.

"It's difficult to try to grade air quality based on a single year's data," he said. "When we have really hot, stagnant weather, which we had to an extreme degree in 2003, it wreaks havoc on air quality."

In 2004, cool temperatures kept ozone levels in check, and the region only recorded 28 days above the federal standard.

Mobility, once again, was the region's lowest score.

The region maintained a D-minus. The area has some of the worst traffic congestion in the nation. Fatal collisions also increased from 1,682 in 2002 to 1,815 in 2003, according to the report.

A majority of people continued to drive alone to work as the number of car poolers and people using public transit dipped slightly. The Inland Empire, on the other hand, maintained the highest ride-sharing percentage in the region.

Transportation funding is one of the major roadblocks facing San Bernardino County and others trying to keep up with rapid growth, said Cheryl Donahue, a spokesman for San Bernardino Associated Governments, the county's transportation agency.

The state continues to use transportation funds to fill budget holes even though voters passed an initiative in March 2002 requiring the state to use gasoline and diesel fuel sales taxes for transportation programs, Biane said.

The initiative, Proposition 42, includes a loophole that allows lawmakers to suspend it during a fiscal crisis.

"The general population out there is trying to send the message about where our priorities should be," he said.